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Multiple Chōmeis: The Last Moment of Contemplation in *Hosshinshū* and *Hōjōki*

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Kamo no Chōmei's (1155–1216) writings present a fascinating case for anyone who is interested in medieval Buddhist self-narration. His most famous work, *Record of the Ten-Foot-Square-Hut* (*Hōjōki*, 1212) has received a lot of attention from both Japanese and Western scholars and has often been compared to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, since he openly discusses the flaws of his nature and other intimate details of his life. At the time when Kamo no Chōmei was writing his autobiographical account at the age of fifty-eight, he was also collecting stories about people who aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land. These stories of both successful and unsuccessful rebirths (*ōjō*) eventually found their way to his collection of Buddhist tales (*setsuwa*) called "A Collection of Tales on the Awakening of the Faith" (*Hosshinshū*, 1214). It is important to notice that both of these works were written by an old man who was looking back at the events that had led to the moment, while preparing for the inevitable approach of death. The ending of *Hōjōki* represents one of the most beautiful pieces of self-writing during the early Kamakura era and serves as a good starting point for a discussion of the author's attitudes towards his life and death. I will cite it here in full using the Helen Craig McCullough's excellent translation (McCullough 1990: 392):

> The moon of my life is setting; my remaining years approach the rim of the hills. Very soon, I shall face the darkness of the Three Evil Paths. Which of my old disappointments is worth fretting over now? The Buddha teaches us to reject worldly things. Even my affection for this thatched hut is a sin; even my love of tranquility must be accounted as impediment to rebirth. Why do I waste time in description of inconsequential pleasures? As I reflect on these things in the quiet moments before dawn, I put a question to myself:
>
> > You retired to the seclusion of remote hills so that you might discipline your mind and practice the Way, but your impure spirit belies your monkish garb. Your dwelling presumes to imitate the abode of the honourable Yuima, but you are worse than Śuddhipanthaka when it comes to obeying the commandments. Is this because you let yourself be troubled by karma-ordained poverty, or has your deluded mind finally lost its sanity?
>
> The question remains unanswered. I can do no other than use my impure tongue for three or four repetitions of Amida's sacred name. Then I fall silent.

Yamada Shōzen has pointed out that we encounter two Chōmeis in this passage—the awakened Chōmei and the deluded Chōmei (Yamada 2013b: 112). The first of these criticizes his own affection for the thatched hut, while the second enjoys the tranquility of seclusion that one can express in poetry and music. The first Chōmei is questioning the self, steeped in worldly pleasures, and the second cannot say anything in his defense and thus remains silent. He will repeat *nenbutsu* few times, but there is no certainty as to whether it really works. Thus, Yamada outlines two different voices inherent in the text—one belonging to the *sukimono*[1] Chōmei and the other belonging to a Buddhist practitioner who we can refer to as *śramana* Ren'in (this is the Dharma-name of the author he used for signing *Hōjōki*). Yet another way of labeling these opposing identities can be found in the above-cited passage, where the author, focusing on himself from the outside, describes himself as either the wise Vimalakirti or the dull-witted Śuddhipanthaka. Since the question of which of these images or voices is closer to the historical person Kamo no Nagaakira "remains unanswered," scholars in different ages have struggled to answer it.

The inability to come to a final conclusion concerning the author's attitude towards his practice is largely caused by the ambiguous nature of the word *fushō* in the expression *fushō no amida-butsu* 不請の阿弥陀仏, which has fuelled a lot of controversy. Looking at the translation cited above, we can see that McCullough has omitted the word *fushō* from her translation altogether. Burton Watson translated *fushō* as "ineffectual" (Watson 2002: 77); this follows the interpretation of Yasuraoka Kōsaku (among others), who argues that, by using this word, the author describes his practice as "immature, insufficient and confused" (Yasuraoka 1998: 223). This represents a common attitude among those scholars who see Chōmei as a person devoted solely to literature. Imanari Genshō is one scholar who has fought furiously against the narrative of the "deluded Chōmei"[2] in many of his articles, stressing that it is quite reasonable to think that, after moving to the Hino area, his practice deepened so that he reached the level of other famous *hijiri* living on the mountains.[3] Therefore, according to Imanari, we should interpret *fushō* in the context of the Mahayana sutras, where it is usually understood as "a friend who helps without asking" (*fushō no tomo* 不請之友). This refers to a Bodhisattva, who is devoted to helping living beings go to the other shore without the need for any reward. Imanari is certain that the author "used this expression because he was confident that 'Amida buddha works without asking,' thus purifying the six organs of sense. The only thing that one could truly use the impure tongue to say is *fushō no amida-butsu*" (Imanari 2005: 168–69).

Yamada Shōzen also analyses the meaning of *fushō* from the perspective of Buddhist writings and argues that it would not be too farfetched to compare the usage of this word to that

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[1] This word was used to refer to those who were single-mindedly devoted to the path of poetry or music. For a lengthy discussion of *sukimono* Chōmei, see Rajyashree Pandey's article "Suki and Religious Awakening: Kamo no Chōmei's *Hosshinshū*," *Monumenta Nipponica*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 229–321.

[2] The main proponent of this argument in English writings on Chōmei has been Thomas Blenman Hare who wrote, "The old man never finds his awakening" (Hare 1989, p. 228).

[3] In "The Moon Recitations" (*Gakkōshiki*), Zenjaku even refers to him as Ren'in-shōnin (see Ōsone and Kubota 2000, p. 522), which shows that his Buddhist identity was taken seriously in some circles.

by other thinkers like Dōgen living during the same era (Yamada 2013a: 56). He states that the central meaning of this word should be close to the one found in "Vimalakirti Sutra" and other Buddhist writings with which Chōmei was familiar. On the one hand, there is the deluded Chōmei who cannot find salvation, and on the other hand, there is the awakened Chōmei, who knows that *nenbutsu* works without asking. However, Yamada's analysis of the fractured nature of the ending of *Hōjōki* does not stop here. He not only outlines the two distinct voices (the awakened and deluded Chōmei) that are inherent in the text, but he also hints at the presence of a third Chōmei, who observes the other two from a certain distance (Yamada 2013a: 57). It is in this act of observing or focalizing different aspects of the self in writing that the author truly reveals himself. Having arrived at this conclusion, Yamada still subscribes to the idea that any findings based on reading the text should be superimposed on the historical person. He writes, "I think we can discover here Chōmei during his late years who is unable to make a leap from observer to practitioner. He was destined to wander aimlessly until his death" (Yamada 2013b: 126). According to Yamada, one cannot really get into wholeheartedly voicing the name of Amida by observing things from a distance, as writers often do, and this leads to Chōmei's practice eventually failing.[4]

It is clear that, in discussing the key terms and their interpretation, the scholars resort to a particular image of the author gleaned from a close reading of the text. Different camps present compelling arguments for their particular vision of the "Chōmei as human being" (*ningen*-Chōmei, see Yasuraoka 1998: 228–29) behind the words found in his writings. I believe that this battle cannot be won by choosing sides, but rather by accepting the fractured nature of the author's voice that is so cleverly pointed out by Yamada. We have to take into account that literature, even when it is autobiographical in nature, serves as a testing ground for different possible selves. Instead of reducing all readings of *Hōjōki* to the self-expression of one singular historical person, we can move forward and accept the possibility of multiple selves being present in the text.

In the following discussion, I would like to approach the ending of *Hōjōki* by taking a very long detour through some philosophical ideas presented in *Hosshinshū*, and I hope to outline the somatic aspects of the self in the process. I will try to show that, whereas on the higher level of the synthesis of self, there is indeed a clear fracture between the awakened and the deluded self, on the lower level we can trace the multiplicity of smaller selves, called "larval selves" by Gilles Deleuze, working in every moment of contemplation. To successfully face one's last moment, one needs to control the narrative level of self; also, the numerous contemplative souls or selves present in one's body. I will therefore argue that Chōmei was indeed an "observer" as Yamada said, but in a very involved way. Since the following discussion supports reading both *Hōjōki* and *Hosshinshū* as part of Buddhist literature, I will here switch the author's name from Chōmei to Ren'in, to remind the reader that I am constructing the author's voice from the perspective of Buddhist discourse.

[4] See also the discussion of Yamada's article in Pandey 1998, p. 167.

In doing this, I am not choosing sides and I am fully aware that another author—the court-poet Chōmei—is also present in the text, ready to undermine every word I say.

Contemplating Selves

When we want to understand how "self" functions in medieval Japanese writings that describe the death of an individual being, we have to take into account that self was not only connected to an intellectual understanding of self, but also deeply rooted in different somatic aspects of one's body. The central concept that governs any discussion of death in medieval Japan is *nen* 念, which appears in many different forms in *Hosshinshū*: "single moment of contemplation" (*ichinen* 一念), "right contemplation" (*shōnen* 正念) and "deluded contemplation" (*mōnen* 妄念): all refer to the quality of the final seconds of a man's life. *Hōjōki* and *Hosshinshū* were both greatly influenced by Genshin's (942–1017) "Essentials of Birth in the Pure Land" (*Ōjō yōshū*, 985), which contains important instructions for deathbed practice. A copy of this text even found a prominent place in Ren'in's hut (McCullough 1990: 388), and should therefore serve as a good starting point for discussing these concepts.

One of the important points made by this treatise is often repeated in stories of a good rebirth (*ōjō* 往生). The good friend (*zenchishiki* 善知識) should admonish the dying person with following words (Dobbins 1999: 174): "Follower of the Buddha, do you realize it? This is your last thought, this single reflection at death outweighs [all] the karmic acts of a hundred years. If this instant should pass you by, rebirth [in samsara] will be unavoidable." Dobbins translated *ichinen* as "single reflection at death," but the moment of death was really an utmost test of not only mental resolve, but also the control of one's body. Keeping the hand in the position of mudra and keeping one's composure at the moment of death was seen as a benevolent sign, but the contorting of hands and feet, sweating from the entire body, defecating without awareness, etc., were considered to be signs that a bad rebirth would occur (Stone 2008: 80). Therefore, the final *nen* is about the state of the whole body-mind, which is not often thought of, especially since the English translation of this term usually loses all somatic connotations, overstressing "thinking" and "reflection."

The original use of the character *nen* 念 was firmly rooted in thinking and feeling something in one's heart (even in Japanese it has been read *omou* "to think"), but since Buddhist concepts like *cittakṣaṇa* (moment of contemplation) began to be translated as *ichinen* 一念, people also started to use this sinograph in the sense of thought-moment (Sueki 2012: 93). Following this understanding, translating *nen* as "thought-moment" seems to be quite suitable for the needs of most translators, but there is yet another aspect to this term, which comes from the sinograph *nen* itself. When we look at the parts of this character, we see that it is composed of the upper part "now" 今 and the lower part "heart-mind" 心, which can be interpreted as referring to the state of mind in the present moment. A closer look at

the etymology of the character reveals that the upper part, meaning "now," is a simplified form of the sinograph "to incorporate" 含 (*fukumu*) (Kamata and Yoneyama 2004). Thus, contemplation (*nen*) as a concept seems to suggest the ways that different outside impulses are dealt with and incorporated into one's habitual pattern of behavior. In his discussion of the concept of *xīn* 心 in the writing of Mencius, Douglas Robinson argues that we should translate it as "heart-becoming-mind" or as "feeling-becoming-thinking" (Robinson 2013: 14). He writes: "… to map an emotion as a feeling is to become aware of it, to attend to it, to presence it, to become able to distinguish it from other body states. … As thinking continues to emerge from feeling, ever subtler maps are sketched in—comparing, remembering, imagining, and so on—until we reach what we in the West take to be the pinnacle of thinking, various logical operations (categorizing, sequencing, hierarchizing, and so on)" (Robinson 2013: 15). If we agree with Robinson's approach, we could say that contemplation (*nen*) describes the process through which heart becomes mind and feeling becomes thinking, but also vice versa—it provides a pathway for contemplating the ground of mind and thinking by noticing the different feelings and sensations that are produced by our bodies.

Somatic aspects were also very important in the writings of the founder of the Tiantai tradition, Zhiyi (538–97), whose ideas were very influential in Japan. According to him, the idea of a "single thought-moment comprising three thousand realms" (*ichinen-sanzen* 一念三千) means that "mind is dharmas, and all dharmas are mind" (Stone 1999: 179). Both come to being in the same moment of contemplation. He goes on to say, "Where there is no mind, that is the end of matter; but if the mind comes into being to the slightest degree whatsoever, it immediately contains three thousand [realms]" (Stone 1999: 179). This suggests that one way to think about *nen* is to take it as a process of contemplation, as discussed by Gilles Deleuze in "Difference and Repetition."[5] He tells us that every organism is a sum of contractions, retentions, and expectations. This constitutes time as "lived presence" (Deleuze 1994: 73). The heart, for example, contracts and dilates, then contracts and dilates again. This resembles the ticking of a clock. But according to Deleuze, "contraction also refers to fusion of successive tick-tocks (cases of repetition) in a contemplative soul" and thus "a soul must be attributed to the heart, to the muscles, nerves and cells, but a contemplative soul whose entire function is to contract a habit" (Deleuze 1994: 74). Thus, he arrives at a conclusion that everything is in the process of contracting and contemplating something (Deleuze 1994: 75):

> What organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed? … Perhaps it is irony to say that everything is contemplation, even rocks and woods, animals and men … but irony in turn is still contemplation, nothing but contemplation…

[5] For further discussion of contemplation and Deleuze's philosophy of time see Ott et al. 2010.

We are accustomed to thinking that *nen* operates on the higher lever of intellect—contracting one's past life and anticipating future (for Ren'in, the seemingly unsurpassable line between the awakened and deluded self), but we lose sight of the somatic level of contractions and contemplation's occurring in the body. The real question is whether one's body has acquired the habit of dying, whether the different organs are able to contract and contemplate death. Mindfulness (yet another possibility for translating *nen*) would mean accepting the layered nature of contractions and contemplations that occurs in every single moment and accepting the multiplicity of contemplating souls (Deleuze also calls these "little selves" or "larval selves") that are created by habits. It should be clear from these arguments that philosophical thinking about death and contemplating death in Buddhist thought are completely different operations, since the latter is deeply rooted in somatic practice.

In *Hōjōki*, Ren'in discusses one's "heart-becoming-mind" (*kokoro*) as the process of interaction with four great elements (*shidai* 四大). He closely follows the teachings found in "The Vimalakirti Sutra," where it is explained that men's illnesses arise from the four great elements, since all phenomena, including the body, are composed of them: "The four great elements come together, and therefore we apply a makeshift name, calling the thing a body. But the four major elements have no master, and the body has no 'I' or ego" (Watson 1997: 68). The body is nothing but a temporary formation of the elements like "foam on the water, bubbles on the water" (Watson 1997: 83). This forms a philosophical background for understanding the relationship of the "inner self" with exterior phenomena in Ren'in's writings. He describes all disasters (including whirlwinds, fires, and starvation) as rising from the instability of the elements. The mind (*kokoro*) is intimately connected with this instability, constantly contracting and contemplating the elements, thus leading to suffering and unease. Ren'in cites Kegon Sutra, "The triple world is but one mind" (McCullough 1990: 392), to stress that there is nothing that is separate from one's heart-becoming-mind. As we saw earlier, Deleuze breaks the body and mind into different "small selves," which interact with different formations of elements. Ren'in also breaks his body-mind into functional wholes, thus dissipating the central "I"—the master of one's body. He writes, "I divide my body and put it to two uses: its suits me very well to use my hands as servants and feet as conveyances. My mind understands my body's distress: I allow the body to rest when it is distressed and use it when it feels energetic" (McCullough 1990: 391). Although we might read this as a dualistic statement concerning the separation of the body and mind, it is clear that the mind does not control the body; it is, rather, the body that gives signals of distress to the mind and demands attention. Thus, the author treats his own body as a formation of different "selves" or "contemplative souls," which express themselves by transmitting their own signals that one needs to be aware of. The troubles start when one superimposes a "master self" on these smaller centers operating inside one's body-mind. This also implies that the body should always be actualized according to present needs and that one should be able to understand the habits one has formed in order to be able to overcome and redefine them.

When we think about the situation of death, one should be able to listen to the signals of the dying body much in the same way during the last moment of contemplation. At the last moment of one's life, one should let go of the "master self" and contemplate the constant forming and reforming of the four elements. When one realizes how the elements come together and dissipate, how we attach meaning to their temporary formations, one will not be deluded by any of them. One might successfully form a different body, which would serve as "a conveyance" that can carry one to the other shore. This body can only be created through single-minded devotion to *nenbutsu*. This kind of selfless single-minded devotion opens up the possibility of sharing the experience of death between good friends and forming karmic bonds (*kechien* 結縁) with the dying person, since death does not belong to any particular master.

Controlling the Single Moment of Pain

To see how these philosophical ideas worked in practice, let us take a look at the typical story of good rebirth "How Sukeshige Achieved Rebirth [in Pure Land] due to the Single Invocation of Nenbutsu" (Miki 1976: 117–18), which can be found in *Hosshinshū*. This story also appears in *Goshūi ōjōden* and *Honchō shinshū ōjōden*. A robber shot Sukeshige with a bow. As he felt the arrow penetrate his back, he shouted out with all his might: "Namu amida butsu!" and passed away. His voice was so loud that it was heard in other villages. People gathered around and saw him sitting facing west with closed eyes. Later Sukeshige appeared in a dream to Jakuin, who had been his long-standing friend. In a dream, he was walking in the spacious field and found a dead body lying on the wayside. A large number of monks gathered around the deceased, saying: "The one who achieved good rebirth (*ōjōnin* 往生人) is here. Come, take a look!" When he stepped closer, he saw that it was his friend Sukeshige they were talking about.

Here we see an extreme version of unprepared death. Sukeshige's immediate reaction to the searing pain of the arrow entering his back was to call for the help of Amida. This immediate reaction was a sincere manifestation of his devotion to Amida. The single moment of pain was transformed to a single moment of contemplation focused on rebirth, which presents a perfect moment of transforming the human body into the body of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. In this case, crying for the help of Amida was deeply ingrained into the body of Sukeshige and activated during the moment of pain in his body, when he successfully formed the body-mind of the "one achieving good rebirth." Anyone reading this story would wonder whether his or her own reaction to the last moment of pain might be so favorable. It is no surprise that controlling pain is one of the most important issues discussed in the different stories of *Hosshinshū*.

The connection between final contemplation and one's ability to endure physical pain emerges as a central theme in tales of religious suicide through drowning, starving, and self-immolation. In these situations, both body and mind are truly engaged in the "contemplation of the elements," since the practitioner must deal with the extreme physical pain caused by fire,

water or a lack of nutrients in the body. A particularly interesting case, the discussion of which in *Hosshinshū* covers many important issues concerning one's last moment, is the "Rebirth through Starvation of the Visiting Monk of Shosha Mountain" (Miki 1976: 143). This narrative does not appear in any other setsuwa collection besides *Hosshinshū*, and it is often seen to expresses Ren'in's personal opinion on the matter. The subtitle of this story admonishes us: "Such practices should not be harshly criticized." It is a tale about a reciter of sūtras (*jikyōsha*) who appeared on the Shosha Mountain in Harima. He told an elder monk about his plans:

> I have deeply wished for rebirth in the Land of Bliss due to the correct contemplation at the moment of death (*rinjū-shōnen* 臨終正念), but this end is difficult to control and therefore I have decided to throw away this body at the time when deluded thoughts (*mōnen* 妄念) do not arise and body is not burdened with sickness. Making a torch of one's body and entering the sea seemed too extreme practices for me. Since they seemed too painful I decided to renounce food and pass away peacefully [due to starvation].

The elder monk visited the recluse when the last moment was already near. The recluse, keeping a vow of silence, wrote on the piece of paper, that he was already quite worried about whether he could truly make it, but that a young child appeared in a dream and poured water into his mouth, cooling his body. This strengthened his resolve and he was sure that he was about to succeed. The elder monk was not able to keep this a secret any more, since he wanted students to form a karmic bond (*kechien*) with this extraordinary man. He revealed the whereabouts of the recluse of Shosha Mountain to some people. Large crowds gathered—some to form a karmic bond, and some to drive away evil spirits by throwing rice at him. The recluse was certain that all of this commotion would interfere with his plans of rebirth and decided to sneak away. The crowds were looking for him, wondering where he had disappeared. About ten days later, they found him only about fifty meters away, hidden in the thick bushes growing there. He was holding a sutra and wearing a robe made of paper. "This was indeed extraordinary in this age of final days," says the author, clearly sympathizing with the actions of the protagonist.

This story is followed by a long discussion, where the author delves into a debate about whether or not the practices of suicide, where one tries to control the time and state of his departure, should be commended. Arguing for the legitimacy of suicide, the author points out that all Buddhist practices "ground themselves in inflicting pain on the body and breaking the soul." The path of the Bodhisattva is built on respecting the dharma and renouncing worldly pleasures. One should not look on this lightly, he argued. Shandao was sure to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, but climbed a tree and threw himself down anyway (the veracity of this fact cited in *Hosshinshū* is doubtful). This was done to set an example for others. The practitioner, he stated, should think along the following lines (Miki 1976: 147–48):

> This body is my possession. It is like a dream—empty and decaying. One should not limit [sacrifice] to a single finger. I should throw my body and life into Buddha's path and the single moment of pain (*ichiji no kurushimi* 一時の苦しみ) relieves me of the suffering of beginningless transmigration and due to the help of Buddhas I will be able to face the right moment of contemplation at the time of death.

Even in this day and age, says the author, there are people who end their life this way and there are benevolent signs (such as a good smell or purple clouds) that testify that they truly achieved a good rebirth. The child appearing in the dream to the recluse of Shosha Mountain was also such a sign—people should take this seriously, and there is no benefit in doubting these practices. If you cannot achieve faith in your own mind, you should at least refrain from ruining the trusting heart (*shinjin* 信心) of others.

In reading this discussion, we see that the author clearly distinguishes bodily pain and mental suffering, but he discusses both in the context of facing the last moment of contemplation. The "single moment of pain" (*ichiji no kurushimi*) is clearly experienced with the whole body-mind of the human being. The word body (*mi* 身) is something that encompasses the whole psychophysical existence of a human being. One burns not only his body, but also renounces his status and everything that his body and mind is connected to. One should completely relinquish his personal identity in order to achieve a good rebirth.

The problem of the body and the sensations that the body produces during the final moments is something that the author returns to in many stories. One of these concerns the zen monk who was thinking about burning himself (Miki 1976: 137–38):

> The state of this body is such that many things do not go according to one's plans. Should one encounter terrible sickness which makes it impossible to think [straight] during one's end, it is extremely hard to fulfill one's original intention [of rebirth in Pure Land]. If one does not die at the time when one is free from sickness, the right contemplation at the final moment (*rinjū-shōnen*) remains unattainable.

At first, he decided to make a human torch (*shintō* 身燈) of himself, but since he was confident that pain and other sensations might disturb the moment of correct contemplation, he wanted to make sure that he could withstand the agony of burning. To test this, he used two metal hoes. He heated them up, put them under his armpits, and burns them "until the flesh is burned black and impossible to look at." He did not find it difficult to withstand the pain, but he still had second thoughts. Being a simple man, he was not sure what the final moments would really be like when they were actually at hand. Therefore, he chose to head for Fudaraku, where one can go to their destination in this very body on a boat. The author concludes: "Since his devotion … was not shallow, I am certain he most certainly arrived at his destination." Yanase Kazuo comments on this sentence, "It safe to say, that Chōmei sympathizes with him" (Yanase 1975: 216).

This sympathy for the suffering of others is felt in many stories that discuss physical discomfort in *Hosshinshū*. In the story of "*Nyūsui* of Rengejō," Ren'in cites a certain person (*aru hito* 或人), but Miki Sumito (1998: 154) sees this as the author speaking of his own experience:

> Some foolish people mistakenly say things like "making a human torch out of myself is too difficult, drowning should be much easier." This is because they look at the matter with outsiders' eyes and don't know what it really feels like. A certain *hijiri* once told me: "I was drowning and almost near death, when a person helped me and I survived. The agony I felt when the water entered my nostrils and mouth must have been even worse than the torments of hell. When people think drowning is easy, it's only because they don't know what it's like to commit suicide by drowning."

If the *hijiri* mentioned in this story is indeed Ren'in himself, we might imagine that, much in the same way as he made his "hands as servants and feet as conveyances" (see p. 94 earlier), he wanted to test his body and see how he could contemplate water entering nostrils and mouth. Nostrils, mouth, lungs, and other organs involved in drowning have their own habits of contracting and contemplating elements, which means that any idea that the person (master self) might have about the sensation of dying is nothing but delusion. Testing one's ability to withstand suffering, he argued, should be an important part of death-practice, because only through practice can one anticipate the nature of the last moment of contemplation. This is precisely because body and mind are not separate and one participates in dying with one's whole existence.

Contemplating the Emptiness

The last moment of contemplation was also seen as an opportunity to form karmic bonds (*kechien*), not only between people, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but also between different demonic beings. The karmic bond was such an influential idea precisely because in dying, the person was losing the "master" of his body-mind, he or she was losing the central identity that had kept the person nicely together in life. In dying, the content of contemplation defined both the body and the mind of the one who would be passing to the other shore.

This is why the role of a good friend (*zenchishiki*) was seen to be very important in deathbed practice. According to Genshin, the role of a good friend is to bring up the ten items of contemplation and not to allow any doubt to arise in the dying person's mind "at any single moment of contemplation" (Inoue and Ōsone 1974: 209). The purpose is not to let the sick person form a bond with anything else besides Amida-buddha. Genshin says to the "good friend," "Do not allow [other] objects of perception to arise in the mind of the sick" (Dobbins 1999: 175). This kind of cooperation can clearly be seen in the story "How a certain lady saw transformations of Māra during the final moments" (Miki 1976: 183). The version of this story

can also be seen in the eighth scroll of the nine-scroll version of *Hōbutsushū*. Since the story gives an excellent description of how contemplation works during deathbed practice, I will cite it here in full:

> A certain lady who was a daughter of a princess turned her back to the world. When she fell sick she felt that her end was near and called for a certain holy man (*hijiri*) to act as the her good friend. While repeating *nenbutsu* this woman turned blue and looked quite terrified. *Hijiri* thought this was suspicious and asked: "What is it that you see?" The Lady explained: "Some horrible people have descended in the fiery chariot to take me away!" *Hijiri* said, "Contemplate firmly the original vow of Amida Buddha and constantly voice his name without faltering. Even people who have committed five transgressions can be reborn in Land of Bliss should they meet the *zenchishiki* and repeat nenbutsu ten times. How much more so those who haven't committed any evil deeds like you." Lady acted like she was told and kept repeating *nenbutsu*. After a short while the looks of the lady changed and become very joyful indeed. *Hijiri* asked her again for the reason. She told him: "The fiery chariot vanished. Now a chariot adorned with diamonds has come to meet me and it is filled with numerous heavenly maidens playing music." *Hijiri* tells her: "You should not think about getting on that chariot. Just keep repeating *nenbutsu* like you have done until now and leave it to the Buddha to come and meet you." After some time woman says: "The chariot adorned with diamonds has vanished. Now there is only one monk in dark clothes who is calling out: 'Let us go together now! You do not know the path that leads forth from here. Let me be your companion and show you the way.'" *Hijiri* recommended: "Do not ever think you can go with him. You do not need a guide to go to the Land of Bliss. It is the land you reach on your own (*onozukara*) riding on the mercy of Buddha. Keep repeating *nenbutsu* and think about going alone." After a while the women said: "There is no monk nor any other person I can see anymore." *Hijiri* thought: "This is the opening (*hima*) through which you can pass swiftly to the Land of Bliss if you concentrate and repeat *nenbutsu* with all your resolve." After this, she said *nenbutsu* fifty or sixty times and passed away in the middle of saying the last one. This was surely how Māra tried to trick the lady by taking many different forms.

This story beautifully illustrates how a *zenchishiki* fulfills the role of the assistant sitting beside the dying person. Different visions show up, but the *zenchishiki* admonishes the woman not to be distracted by them. The desired state of mind is complete emptiness, where nothing can be seen: this is the "opening" (*hima* 隙) through which one passes to the other shore. The deathbed scene is where one's ability to reject the delusions and sensations that one's mind and body produce is ultimately tested. To put it in Deleuzian terms, in contemplating death, a possibility for different selves was presented—the horrible-being-self, the heavenly-maiden-self, and the dark-monk-self. If one becomes attached to any of these, the good rebirth is not accessible. The only correct "self" is

the "no-self" generated through the contemplation of an empty opening (*hima*) to the other side. Through contemplating the opening, one's own body would become the opening, as the passage states: "It is the land you reach on you own!" Even when someone meets Buddha in a vision, it would have to be rejected as yet another image for one to attach one's desires and hopes to.

This story resonates with the ending of *Hōjōki*, which also discusses the efficacy of *nenbutsu* as preparation for nearing death. As Yamada Shōzen said, Kamo no Chōmei feels that he remains an observer and is not really able to become involved in the practice of *nenbutsu*. This is why he says two or three *nenbutsu* and remains silent. During medieval times, ten *nenbutsu* was considered the absolute minimum for achieving good rebirth. This number is constantly repeated in different stories, including in the one cited above: "Even people who have committed five transgressions can be reborn in Land of Bliss should they meet the *zenchishiki* and repeat *nenbutsu* ten times." When we read this in the light of final passage of *Hōjōki*, it is clear that attachment to one's hut and other character flaws can easily be overcome if one will only wholeheartedly voice *nenbutsu* at least ten times during the moment of death. The actor of this setsuwa is extremely vigorous, repeating the *nenbutsu* fifty or sixty times until she loses her breath in the middle of saying the last one (*koe no uchi ni iki tae ni keri* 声のうちに息絶えにけり). All of her efforts were concentrated on squeezing herself through the empty opening (*hima*) to the other side. She falls silent not of her own volition, but because her voice is interrupted by transition to the other world. Her final moment of contemplation is both empty and voiceless. The last outbreath of a dying person is used for saying the last syllables of *nenbutsu* before she passes away.

If we read the last passages of *Hōjōki* as a practice for the approaching death, we can understand that *fushō no amida-butsu* might indeed be considered "useless" or "ineffectual" *nenbutsu*, because Ren'in imagines a deathbed scene as the real place where the true effect of one's *nenbutsu* is tested. At the moment of writing, the author is aware that this is nothing but writing-towards-death (to use the Heideggerian expression), which is unable to grasp the real experience of a true *nenbutsu* at the time of dying. The author is distanced from the text and thus the positions of two distinct voices inside the text—Buddhist practitioner Ren'in and Court-Poet Chōmei—become ambiguous. Chōmei might fail because he is attached to literature and music. Ren'in might fail because he is attached to the idea of the perfect moment of death without being able to overcome the physical suffering at the moment of voicing a final *nenbutsu*. He might be unable to approach death without any preconceptions. The author, who is the observer of these possible fates (the third Chōmei, as Yamada called him), is aware of the different possible selves, but does not yet know which one of these will be actualized during his last moments. Death appears as a final test, where his true self will be revealed.

Thus, we might read the words *fushō no amida-butsu* in the following sense: any *nenbutsu* except for the one you voice during your last breath, is useless. The last breath is the one that truly counts. The last breath opens the passage (*hima*) to the other shore. It is difficult to know whether one will be able to contemplate Amida "at the moment of pain," which might

liberate you but might also condemn you to the depths of hell. It is impossible to know whether one is able to "become dead" in the sense of accepting the no-self that actively contracts and contemplates emptiness.

The Rest Is Silence

It seems to me that using the word *yaminu* at the end of *Hōjōki* invokes many different senses of this potent word. First, it marks a place where both the narrator and the author fall silent. The character inside the story stops the *nenbutsu* and the author raises his brush, interrupting the story. Since Ren'in was so involved in the *ōjōden*-canon, rewriting many of the stories in his own collection, he was most certainly aware of the limits of autobiographical writing. It would indeed be nice if one could write the ending of one's own story, if one could finish with a description of successful *ōjō*, as in the story of a certain lady above, but one always reaches the outer limit of any act of self-writing[6]—the text is always destined to be open-ended. The ultimate meaning of one's life is not complete without an ending, but this can only be written by the next generation of biographers. Thus, the concrete author must rely on other powers in two senses: Amida must help him to the other shore during the last contemplation, and the subsequent storyteller must help him to finish the story.

The English translation by McCullough beautifully captures this by making *yaminu* a separate sentence: "Then I fall silent" (McCullough 1990: 392). This final sentence conjures the ghost of Hamlet voicing his final words: "… the rest is silence." Hamlet cannot continue talking; the play is about to end. However, when the play is staged, the actual sight of the dying character gives meaning to the silence that follows Hamlet's last words, "After all is said and done, the way in which Hamlet dies, whether in pain or with mockery, or with some sense of fortunate release, will still be manifest in his facial expression and in the manner in which his body lies on the stage" (Brown 1992: 29). The meaning of the play cannot be judged without seeing it on stage. Much in the same way, the author of *Hōjōki* was conscious that writing about practice does not bring oneself closer to practice unless the writing itself is seen as a kind of practice.

Anyone reading the *ōjōden* canon knows the meaning that is attached to the state of the body after death. The configuration of one's limbs and the expression one's face constitute the final signs to be read by those left behind. A calm face, hands in the position of mudra, and an upright position were all signs of a true *ōjōnin*. The body was seen to speak its own somatic language, which never lied. Unfortunately, the state of the body of the author of *Hōjōki* was never properly documented. Although he prepared for the final chapter to be written by his own body, this last transmission was never received, and thus the nature of his *ōjō* was unfortunately never verified. I am certain that this is not the kind of silence he had hoped for.

[6] The moment of death must always be described by somebody else and it is a task of the subsequent storyteller to give a complete account of a person's life (Arendt 1958, p. 193; see also Allik 2012).

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